

*A REALLY GOOD BOY*

He hunches in the shade of his truck's open hood, leaning like a man on crutches. For an April morning it's hotter than shit and he's down to his last beer already. He hears her talking but doesn't catch it; asks her to repeat herself.

Said I give you a dollar to cut my grass, she says.

He finds his beer on the truck's air box, downs the rest of it, lands the bottle next to the others at his trailer door; last one til noon, Sunday morning's curse on the wicked. Thinking of curses reminds him of the drought and he looks out at the yard they share between trailer lots. The greenest patch he can find is an empty Mountain Dew can, crushed in the dirt.

Tell you what, he says, turning back to his truck—it ever rains I'll do it for free.

It was a pretty good line.

Do somethin else for free, she says—if you want to.

He grabs hold of the serpentine belt and tugs, leaves it hanging loose on the pulleys, reminding him of something black and lacy, overstretched between ankles.

Dont need rain to get it wet neither, Cowboy, she says, and laughs a little to herself.

He wants to counter with something cool. He thinks for a moment but comes up empty. He hears her say:

You in there, Boochy-boo?

He looks up at her, at Aimee, standing inside the screen door of her trailer, a gray silhouette tinted pink, like a black-and-white western with the color added later. She turns sideways to show how big she is getting. He thinks of something to say:

How much longer?

Wrong way to put it, but she doesn't seem to mind; she just gazes down at the roundness of her belly, stroking the inches of bare skin between the waistband of her shorts and the hem of her tank top. Maybe she didn't hear him; maybe he only thought it.

Past couple weeks felt like I was in heat, Boochy, she says. Wild-ass hormones, you know what I'm sayin? My cousin Findy is a doula, you know what that is?

He nods, pawing through his toolbox, for what he can't remember.

Findy says some pregnant women get horny and I must be one.

They absolutely cannot fuck until they have the Kansas talk, he has already decided. And that conversation is on hold until he gets the water pump swapped on his truck.

Anyway, got me kinda excited, she says, seeing your truck was back.

With the water pump fixed he can make a beer run. After a few beers, he'll have the courage to hear her answer.

Findy says it helps with labor supposively, the sex I mean.

*Labor*, the word takes him back; he remembers the truck in door-deep snow, the dog bounding ahead of him in the spotlight, moans from the gulley. He puts a ratchet to the pump bolts and breaks them loose.

If you get no better offers by your due date, he says to the engine, I'll be your man.

He shakes his head. Didn't sound half as smooth as he'd hoped.

Suit yourself, Booch.

He has never liked his name, but he likes how Aimee says it, how she stretches it out and sands it down, transforming it into the smoothest word in the English language, the kind of name that *plops* into water instead of belly flopping, like *Butchhhh!*

He looks up from his hands. She is smiling at him from her doorway, her fingertips tracing down her belly like streaks of water clinging to a beach ball, trickling down into the pink waistband of her shorts. He figures one-in-three it's his kid. Maybe even fifty-fifty.

He watches as she moves one leg higher, hand inside her underwear, hunting for her rhythm, anxious for the wet rock and slide. She is looking at him but not really.

He steps out of the shade and leans against the side of his truck, sun-hot metal on his stomach, feeling himself grow hard against the fender, wishing to God she'd offered him a beer first.

By design, the alarm can be heard throughout the trailer park—country music blare, rap thump, heavy metal grind; somewhere “Margaritaville” is having the *fuck* played out of it.

His dog helps too, barking from its shady spot under the truck. He calls the animal out and scratches it between the ears, working loose a pile of fur, then brushes and blows it clean. The dog ducks, going cross-eyed with pleasure. He sniffs his fingers, soured by the dog's skin. He finds a jerky stick in his shirt pocket, covered with lint. The dog sits.

I hear it, boy. Good boy.

The sheriff's deputy appears, shoulder radio squawking, sunglasses intended for major league shortstops, gun belt worn high and tight like the man had gone swimming and gotten stuck inside an inner tube. The deputy calls out to him, shouting over the noise:

What's a *bitch* call her *cunt*?

He slips the old serpentine belt over the pulleys and lets go. The tensioner arm jerks it tight.

Her Butch! The deputy laughs. I said her *Butch!* *Get it?* *Cunt...* plus *bitch?* Heard that one?

He goes around the side of his truck, reaches through the window for the steering wheel and blasts the horn, five long times, claiming the trouble.

The alarm is switched off, trailer by trailer, song by song, until only Jimmy Buffett is left playing—camouflage for flushing meth, he figures, a fresh argument maybe or perhaps the clapping of forbidden thighs while someone is away at church.

His dog won't quit either, savoring its ancient purpose renewed, fanged-out and watery, leaping at the intruder, shockwaves of dust with each blast off, rope going taut and landing the animal on its rigid back, more determined than ever to fly the flag; filled, he thinks, with loyalty beyond his understanding.

The deputy points—

Chill that fuckin thing out!

He spits in the dirt, then says to the spit, loud enough for the deputy to hear:

Dog's got a name, Pig.

A screen door slams. He doesn't turn, doesn't see until she's halfway across the yard, same tank top and pink shorts. The dog sees her and settles down. The deputy eases back and stares.

Hey there, Aimee.

Aimee nods to the deputy.

*Footloose* is on, she says, kneeling to stroke the dog's face, wiping drool across the back pocket of her shorts.

Me and Maui just *love* us some Kevin Bacon.

She leads the dog away without another word. He waits for the screen door to close behind them, listens for Aimee to set the latch.

You named a boy dog Maui?

The deputy chuckles to himself.

Sure you aint queer? Not too late to change it. Named every dog I owned *Sundance*, I was you.

The deputy spits—ropey from a hidden pinch of dip.

What's busted on your truck, Butch? Looks like a water pump. Weepin out? Had one go on my cruiser while back; thing blew smoke like the goddamn D-Day invasion; swear to God it

smelled just like a pancake house burnin down; sweet-like, you know? Lucky you made it back at all. Where you been past couple months anyway, Butch?

Flint Hills, he says. Kansas.

The deputy smiles, a failure of teeth and loose tobacco.

Whats up in Can's Ass?

He remembers purple sunrises, placentas steaming on the snow.

Calves, he says.

The deputy nods.

Work's good, Butch. Man without work's got too much time on his hands—too much time to dwell on his own problems.

He hears Jimmy Buffett's music growing louder again, serenading the park. House has wheels—might as well pretend it's parked at the beach.

*FINS TO THE LEFT!*

*FINS TO THE RIGHT!*

He hears Maui barking again from inside Aimee's trailer, mistaking the music for a re-activated alarm. He sees the deputy's holster come unsnapped.

Must be pretty flush, whole season of ranch work in your pocket.

He glances back at the trailer, hears Aimee shouting for calm.

Aint been paid yet, he says to the deputy. Goin back for it next week.

Someone yells: *FUCK the PO-LEECE!* from a hidden corner of the park. The deputy moves toward him.

Problem is, Butch, til you're paid up, Sheriff says you cant leave town again.

He tries to step sideways but the bumper catches his leg. The deputy grabs him.

Hid our money up some rancher's asshole, huh? Smart motherfucker.

The deputy turns him against the truck, puts a knee into his back, fumbling with the handcuffs, trying to make it look real. He smells wintergreen tobacco and antifreeze; thinks he can taste minty pancake syrup and it makes him want to throw up. Everything around him is shouting and barking and *MOTHER FUCK THE PO-LEECE!* and *Margaritaville* going strong for the second time, all fighting to ring loudest in his mind.

But there is another sound, smaller and at a frequency beneath the ruckus, a slip-kicking shuffle he recognizes; *hooves crossing asphalt*, he thinks, or *tires on flint gravel*, but the sound is gone before he correctly identifies it as *dog claws over linoleum*, just as Maui come bursting through Aimee's door screen, making a sound he would normally reserve for *ripping crotch of jeans*, the small gray silhouette flaring golden brindle in the morning sun, sparkling like metal flake, tumbling face first, booming in the dirt like a thrown bowling ball.

The deputy drops the handcuffs and goes for the holster with both hands:

Control him!

He dives for Maui's collar.

Control the dog!

He hears a woman scream.

There is a loud light—a flash of wind—like the arrival of a storm, one that begins as a cool blessing but floats the whole town by the end. He thinks he smells rain but the sky is dry and Easter blue.

God damnit, he hears someone say. God *damnit*.

Must have rained in the night, he thinks. He was drunk when he pulled in, might not have noticed. He can feel it now where he's standing, water coming up from the dirt, wetting his boot seams, soaking through his socks. He feels his feet sinking, like standing in surf, like the only beach he's ever visited, a boyhood trip to Galveston. His father was afraid of jellyfish but said, first beer of the morning in hand, that the water looked like runoff from Mexico and then walked away, down

the beach; and so he'd waded out alone, eight years old, waist deep, watching for his father among the other vacationers and for the pale ghosts in the water all around him, hanging like angry piñatas just beneath the surface, rippled and whipped by the Gulf winds, which also brought the waves. The first one made a sound against his back when it smacked him, a sound like *utchhhh!* and somersaulted him underwater through the mud and sand. He found his footing, stood salty and gasping, just in time for the second wave. This one he heard clearly when it struck him; heard it call him by name, just like his father did before the swing came, smacking into him, making a sound like *butchHHH!!!* Knocking flat him on his ass, flipping him upside down, packing his mouth and nostrils with grit and tanker leakage. Then it passed and left him there, lying in shallow water with his ankles peeking above the surface like the eyes of some giant sea snail, feeling silky and cold in the wind. Later, he'd found the old man asleep in the back seat of the Pontiac, bare feet out the window, half-empty bottle between the man's thighs as if intending to collect what came back out, perhaps in hopes of a second pressing.

I said control him, God damnit. You hear me say that? God *damnit!*

He sees Maui's body in the dirt. Maybe it was a stupid name for a dog after all.

He reaches into his pocket and comes out with something palm-sized and black. It could have been anything, a cell phone maybe, if he owned one. He points it at the deputy's forehead, remembering how brown the waves were in Galveston. He tries instead to think of Hawaii, of photographs he'd seen, waves as blue as April skies, but he can't picture it. He thinks, Gulf of Mexico or the crystal Pacific, in the end it's all the same shitty water. His head is pounding. He concentrates, trying to think of the Flint Hills, once an ancient inland sea, now made of wind-scarred crests and glacial valleys broad as cities. But he can't see that either. The thing nearly jumps from his hand when he squeezes it.

The spring on his screen door makes a wailing sound as it stretches. He comes out of his trailer with a duffel bag and a beach towel. The dog's body he wraps in the towel and lays the bundle on the truck's floorboard so it won't flop around as he drives. He gives everything around the engine a last glance and slams the hood.

Booch?

He turns; sees her crying in her doorway.

I'm so— I couldn't—

The deputy's head lies in a growing puddle, foaming the dirt like spilled motor oil. Neighbors are gathering. No music is playing.

You gotta go, Boochy. You gotta go right now.

It's too late to tell her about Kansas, about the empty house on his buddy's ranch, steady work, get the hell out of Texas; about his buddy's wife with two small boys and a German shepherd sweet on Maui; about the way the tallgrass moves, the big bluestem, like wind on the water, making silent waves. But none of that exists anymore.

He was a really good boy, he says to the truck.

She is standing behind the torn screen, her pregnant belly playing peek-a-boo with him through the waving flap, wet spots on her tank top where it's stretched across the swelling paradise.

Aimee, he begins.

He sees her smile. Then she steps back, her pink silhouette fading, then disappearing completely behind her shutting door.



They still have cattle operations in Hawaii. Hobby ranchers mostly but a few legacy spreads.

Some college boy busted his eyebrow open in Austin one night and the Emergency Room had a *National Geographic* about it. That had been the dream for years after; be a cowboy in Hawaii.

It was a black trash bag, middle of the road in Oklahoma, too heavy to blow away. Only one had survived, scooped from the viscera of its smashed and broken siblings. They slept side-by-side every night, in the truck when they had to, tucked under blankets, like a baby brother; the only pit bull puppy he'd ever seen work cattle on instinct; reason he named the dog Maui in the first place.